

“Memory Between Politics and Ethics: Del Barco’s Letter”
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[The] face of the other, without recourse, without security, exposed to my look and in its weakness and its mortality is also the one that orders me: “Thou shalt not kill.”

—Emmanuel Levinas, “The Proximity of the Other”

The specific political distinction to which political actions and motives can be reduced is that between friend and enemy.... The political enemy need not be morally evil or aesthetically ugly; he need not appear as an economic competitor, and it may even be advantageous to engage with him in business transactions. But he is, nevertheless, the other, the stranger; and it is sufficient for his nature that he is, in an especially intense way, existentially something different and alien, so that in the extreme case conflicts with him are possible. These can neither be decided by a previously determined general norm nor by the judgment of a disinterested and therefore neutral third party. Only the actual participants can correctly recognize, understand, and judge the concrete situation and settle the extreme case of conflict. Each participant is in a position to judge whether the adversary intends to negate his opponent’s way of life and therefore must be repulsed or fought in order to preserve one’s own form of existence.

—Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*

This paper looks at an ongoing debate in Argentina concerning how experiences of political conflict during the 1960s and 70s are remembered today.¹ I am particularly interested in a controversy concerning experiences of militancy and armed struggle that began with the publication of an interview with Héctor Jouvé, a former guerrilla participant, published in the Córdoba monthly journal *La intemperie*. Jouvé recounts his experiences as a young political activist in the 1960s, beginning with his decision to join the *Ejército Guerrillero del Pueblo* (EGP), a small group—modeled after Che Guevara’s Sierra Maestra guerrilla force—that was to operate in the northern Argentine province of Salta. In the wake of this two-part interview with Jouvé, the journal published a letter by the Córdoba philosopher Oscar del Barco denouncing the political use of violence and asserting an ethical injunction of non-violence—“*No matarás*” (Thou Shalt Not Kill)—as the first principle of all social life. Del Barco’s letter also delivers a “confession” in which the author discloses his own support for armed struggle during the 1960s and 70s. He asserts that, by virtue of his intellectual and moral decisions, he shares responsibility

for the errors and transgressions committed by armed Leftist militant groups. Moreover, he calls on others who formerly voiced intellectual and moral support for political violence to acknowledge their errors and seeking forgiveness. Del Barco's missive has prompted responses from a significant number of Argentine intellectuals of his generation, many of whom have expressed reservations about the nature of the critique. The polemic rapidly extended beyond the confines of the Córdoba journal *La intemperie*, making its mark in cultural venues such as *Conjetural*, *El interpretador*, *El ojo mocho*, *Página 12* and *Pensamiento de los Confines*.

A small sample of these letters has recently been translated by Philip Derbyshire and published for English-speaking audiences in the *Journal of Latin American Cultural Studies* 16:2 (August 2007). That volume of *JLACS* includes an introduction by Jens Andermann, John Kraniauskas and Derbyshire providing historical context for the debate, del Barco's "*No matarás*" letter and responses by Juan Bautista Ritvo, Eduardo Grüner, Jorge Jinkis and Diego Tatián—all prominent Argentine intellectuals—as well as a reply to these responses by del Barco. The polemic thus requires little in the way of further introduction.

What is needed, in my view, is an assessment of how this particular debate contributes to—and perhaps sheds new light on—thinking about ethics and politics today. The polemic surrounding "del Barco's letter," I will propose, sheds light on a fundamental antagonism that runs between the ethical and the political spheres. For many this antagonism takes the form of an either/or: either politics or ethics (either Marx or Freud, Badiou or Levinas, for instance) but not both. The translation of this antagonism into the logic of choice comes with a price: it happens at the expense of thinking what these two spheres might have in common, either despite the antagonism or precisely because of it. By the same token, the either/or has the effect of imputing

to each “sphere” a sense of stability and self-consistency that may in fact blind us to what is really at stake in ethical and political thinking.²

Not only does the controversy surrounding the Jouvé interview and del Barco’s letter bring back to life unresolved conflicts from the past, it serves at the same time as a kind of screen on which something that is out of joint in the historical present can be projected. Why does this debate take place when it does, a full four decades after the events in question and three decades after the most intense period of political conflict in recent Argentine history? How does the occurrence of the debate—which many of the participants understand as breaking a long silence on the part of the Left concerning its participation in the events that preceded the 1976-83 dictatorship—retroactively shape our understanding of the intervening decades as precisely a time of relative oblivion, a time when it may not yet have been possible for the Left to begin to assess not only its role in the historical traumas of the recent past but also the traumatic resonances between the past and the historical present? What new element or transformation could account for the apparent fact that, with del Barco’s letter, it has now become possible for a certain generation of the Argentine intellectual Left to begin to display internal disagreements regarding its own history of political thinking and decisions? And finally, what gives this particular polemic over the political use of lethal violence the power to interpellate such a broad spectrum of the Argentine intelligentsia? If we are to begin to provide satisfactory responses to these questions, we cannot focus exclusively on the specific events in question, as controversial, abhorrent—and fascinating—as they may be.

A similar topic had arisen at least once before in recent Argentine public life, albeit without the participation of a first-hand witness and participant such as Jouvé, and did not prompt nearly the volume or intensity of response seen in the del Barco case. I am referring to an

exchange that took place through the medium of the Buenos Aires daily *Página 12* in the mid-1990s, in which the journalist-historian Osvaldo Bayer and the writer Mempo Giardinelli debated possible justifications for killing a “tyrant.”³ The polemic began when Bayer published an essay entitled “Matar al tirano” on January 23, 1993, the seventieth anniversary of the assassination of Lieutenant Colonel Héctor Varela by the German immigrant and anarchist Kurt Gustav Wilckens. Varela had led an army repression of striking workers in rural Patagonia in 1921 (the culmination of a history made famous by Bayer in the early 1970s with the publication of a four-volume work entitled *La Patagonia rebelde*) and authorized the summary execution of an estimated 1,500 workers. The Lieutenant Colonel met his own end as he left his home on the morning of January 23, 1923. Wounded by the blast of a bomb that Wilckens threw, Varela drew his saber, at which point Wilckens emptied his revolver into Varela’s body. Wilckens was himself hurt in the skirmish, reportedly because he used his own body to shield from the blast a girl who had suddenly crossed the street at the moment of the attack. Unable to flee, he was detained by the police. Four months later, while awaiting sentencing, he was assassinated in jail by a member of the reactionary Argentine Patriotic League. In his “Matar al tirano” letter, Bayer marks the anniversary of the assassination of Varela by asserting the heroic nature of Wilckens’ deed. Bayer reiterates the anarchist’s insistence that he acted in the name of striking workers in Patagonia to prevent further bloodshed while also appealing to the 12th century English philosopher and theologian John of Salisbury, whose *Policraticus* stated that to slay a tyrant is not only allowable but also just—indeed, according to John it is a civic duty.⁴ Bayer seeks to dispel suspicions that the killing was motivated by vengeance, citing a public letter Wilckens wrote from jail shortly before his assassination, in which the anarchist links his act to the singular nature of the repression and slaughter of workers. Wilckens denies that he was

motivated by vengeance or by some abstract political sentiment, such as the anti-militarism often associated with anarchists: “It was not vengeance...I did not see Varela as just any old officer. No, in Patagonia he was everything: government, judge, executioner and grave digger. In him I was taking aim at the naked idol of a criminal system. Vengeance is unbecoming of an anarchist. Tomorrow, our tomorrow [*el mañana, nuestro mañana*], has nothing to do with bickering, crimes or lies: it is an affirmation of life, love, and science. We are working to hasten that day’s arrival” (As quoted in “Matar al tirano,” my translation). In citing Wilckens’ letter, Bayer wants us to understand the killing as an *act* (Bayer’s term), or an iconoclastic deed that takes aim at the sacred center of a corrupt system in order to transform the coordinates of the system itself. The act frees itself from the criminality of vengeance because, in Bayer’s eyes, it situates itself outside the pathological, ego-governed economy of power. Wilckens acts with the radical intention of transforming a society dominated by the oligarchic interests of Argentina’s agro-export industries. Of course, one could question Bayer’s rationale for using Wilckens as an example, as one would be hard pressed to argue that the killing of Varela had any desirable transformative effect on social relations in 1920s Argentina. Perhaps the real motive behind Bayer’s homage to Wilckens lies in the attempt to recover from the past an image that could reignite radical contestatory politics in the late capitalist context of post-dictatorship Argentina.

Giardinelli, by contrast, insists that Wilckens’ deed was nothing other than premeditated murder.⁵ His position is strikingly similar to that of del Barco: Giardinelli asserts that any premeditated killing (as opposed to spontaneous action in the immediate defense of one’s own) is equivalent to murder. He states that universal prohibitions against killing constitute the foundation of any democratic society. In asserting that the killing of Varela was a criminal act, Giardinelli offers that it is as if he, in 1993, were to decide to assassinate General Videla, one of

the former leaders of the 1976-83 military dictatorship. As the analogy makes clear, the Wilckens case in fact serves as a historical screen and filter that enables intellectual reflection on the recent past while ensuring that the wounds that remain fresh a decade after dictatorship will not be reopened.

With Giardinelli's reference to democracy, moreover, it becomes evident that the stakes of this debate concern not only the past—either distant or not so distant—but also the historical present of post-dictatorship. At issue is the problem of how to think or rethink what democracy might look like, both in view of the enormous toll that two decades of political violence and state repression have taken on Argentine republicanism and civic life, and in light of what was then an emerging pressure from international monetary institutions such as the World Bank and the IMF to impose free-market reforms on national economies while redefining the political sphere—per what would become known as the “Washington Consensus”—as an administrative and technological sphere reserved for bureaucrats and specialists, rather than a common space for disagreement and deliberation over the good.

A comparison of the del Barco polemic with the Bayer-Giardinelli debate reveals an interesting distinction concerning the positions staked out by those who do not rule out violence as a viable political category, or who express doubts about the more or less universal proscriptions against violence issued by Giardinelli and del Barco. While Bayer's “Matar al tirano” is an unqualified celebration of the killing of Varela, none of del Barco's critics (at least as far as I am aware) go so far as to defend the lethal violence employed by the guerrilla movements in the 1960s and 70s, such as the Montoneros' 1970 kidnapping and killing of Pedro Aramburu (a former Argentine President and General associated with the illegal execution of Peronist politicians and labor leaders in the 1950s. Indeed, it is strange that none of del Barco's

opponents (as far as I am aware) speaks of *any* concrete instance of violence at all. Instead, they limit themselves to critiquing his critique of violence. Does this distinction between Bayer and del Barco's critics have to do with the fact that Bayer has chosen a context far removed from the present and thus easier to portray as an exemplary and heroic act, given that none of the principle participants are still living? Does the patina of historical time soften the horrific violence of Varela's death while enhancing the noble glow of Wilckens' "tomorrow" and enabling us to accept the stark contrast between the scene of violence and the image of a future based not on violence but on love? Or is it easier to exalt Wilckens' deed as heroic because his decision took aim at a situation whose singularity is patent (the struggles of striking workers in the forgotten nether regions of rural Patagonia; their cold-blooded execution at the hands of Varela's troops) whereas the guerrilla strategies employed by Montoneros, ERP and others have precisely the opposite effect of blurring or effacing singularity and grounding themselves in theoretical attempts to generalize and universalize (i.e., the development of the *foco* theory by Régis Debray and Che Guevara as a universal model that can be implemented throughout Latin America without regard for local actors and conditions)?

SOVEREIGNTY OF THE POLITICAL: THE SACRIFICIAL LOGIC OF MILITANCY

In what follows I discuss ethical and political questions raised in the del Barco polemic with the aim of bringing to light a tension that runs between these two domains—and which, in my view, most of the participants appear to translate as an obligation to take sides when it comes to ethics and politics. What I am calling a "tension," for lack of a better term, is neither a relation of compatibility nor a matter of indifference but instead a constitutive antagonism between these domains. The debate sheds light on a sense in which the ethical and the political paradoxically both interrupt and constitute one another. Insofar as the antagonism is constitutive, it prevents us

from choosing one without also encountering the other. In order to develop this point it will be necessary to consider the historical context in which the EGP emerged as a political entity and a fighting force in the immediate aftermath of the Cuban revolution, and at a moment when the experiences of Castro and Guevara in the Sierra Maestra seemed to many an example that could be reproduced and exported on a continental scale.

The EGP operated in the northern Argentine province of Salta, in a densely forested, semi-tropical area near the town of Orán, in late 1963 and early 1964. It was one of the first attempts in Latin America to implement the *foquista* model of guerrilla warfare theorized by Guevara and Debray following the dramatic success of the guerrilla experience against the Batista regime in Cuba in the 1950s. The operation was planned in Cuba by Guevara and his confidantes, including two Argentines: the journalist Jorge Ricardo Masetti and the painter Ciro Bustos. In 1958, Masetti made his name by conducting the famous Sierra Maestra radio interview with Guevara that helped popularize the Cuban Revolution throughout Latin America. The objective with the EGP was to create a spark in Salta, one of the most impoverished and ignored provinces in Argentina, which would in turn awaken and catalyze potential revolutionary actors elsewhere in the country, including the labor movement, students and other urban intellectuals. The EGP cadres were recruited from middle and upper middle class families in Córdoba and Buenos Aires, together with a handful of seasoned Cuban fighters. Jouvé, along with 20 or so others, gathered under the leadership of Masetti and Bustos, a relatively unknown painter from Mendoza who had traveled to Cuba in 1961 as a volunteer and who, just a few years later, would be accused by many of having betrayed Guevara to the Bolivian army and the CIA.

The history of the EGP in Salta is brief and unremarkable, and until the recent controversy, the group had become a more or less forgotten moment in the annals of the Latin

American Left. Nonetheless, a number of prominent Argentine intellectuals of the time became affiliated with the EGP after having broken with the Argentine Communist Party over issues such as the party's inability to establish ideological independence from Moscow, its refusal to support the Cuban Revolution, and its insistence on a strategy of accommodation with post-1955 Argentine military governments. Among those leaving the Party were Masetti and two key intellectual supporters of the EGP, Juan Carlos Portantiero and José Aricó, both of whom played important roles introducing the work of Gramsci in Latin America. Aricó's journal, *Pasado y presente*, devoted its inaugural editorial statement in 1963 to the emergence of this new armed group.

During the planning stages in Cuba, Guevara and his cohorts had envisioned that the EGP would be greeted as liberators in a country dominated by an unpopular military regime, which had banned the popular Peronist party and installed a figurehead president in José María Guido. Shortly after Masetti and a small group left their base in Bolivia and crossed the Argentina border in July 1963, however, the Argentine military announced a new round of presidential elections. As Jon Lee Anderson describes it in his biography of Guevara, Masetti was initially unperturbed by this change in events, expecting—like most observers—that the military's candidate, Pedro Aramburu (one of the leaders of the “Revolución Libertadora” coup against Perón, and also President from 1955-58), would be declared the winner. But when Arturo Illia, a Radical Party moderate and a widely respected medical doctor, unexpectedly defeated Aramburu, the plan suddenly became unhinged: what was to have been a “liberation” would now be seen as an “invasion” directed against a democratically elected government. After long deliberation, however, Masetti decided to go ahead with the operation, sending Bustos ahead armed with a public letter to Illia denouncing his “collaboration” with the military regime and its

oligarchic supporters. In the letter, Masetti described the July elections as “the most scandalous electoral fraud in the history of the country” and declared that the EGP cadres were the “only free men in this oppressed republic” (Anderson 574).

In its eight months of existence the guerrilla did not engage once militarily with security forces in the region. In April 1964, with its support networks having been infiltrated by state intelligence forces and its cadres weakened by hunger, disease, declining morale and desertions, the surviving members of the group were encountered and detained without a struggle by the Argentine *Gendarmería*. However, the abject failure of the EGP as a military force is not nearly as illuminating as its political failure, as evidenced by the inability to make meaningful inroads with local populations despite organizing numerous efforts to improve the health and education of a people who had for a long time gone ignored by the governing elite. In an interview with Anderson, Bustos attributes the EGP’s failure to win over the local populations to the inhospitable geographical and social conditions in the region. The jungles of Salta resisted cultivation and were thus sparsely populated. Those who did make their home there lived in a state of squalor and ignorance that in Bustos’ estimation impeded the development of communal structures with which the guerrilla could engage. In a telling statement, Bustos describes the extreme underdevelopment in Salta as antithetical for any political subjectivity whatsoever:

It was shocking... You couldn’t even call these people *campesinos*. These were people who lived in little bush clearings, full of fleas and dogs...and snot-nosed kids, with no links to the real world, nothing. They didn’t even live in the conditions of the Indians who at least have their food, their tribes and things. These people were really lost, marginalized. They could hardly be called a social base for what we were trying to do. They were experiencing problems that were real, but their misery was such that they were completely ruined (Anderson 576).

This grim portrait recalls—no doubt unconsciously?—Domingo Sarmiento’s well-known account of the Argentine interior as a vast extension of nothingness. In view of the textual

resonances of *Facundo* in Bustos' account of the Orán region, it would be interesting to consider the possibility that an unthought line of continuity runs from 19th century Liberalism to 20th century Marxist thought in Latin America. Perhaps what these two perspectives have in common is their unquestioned reliance on a teleological understanding of history as development, which in turn generates the tendency to see everything that resists developmentalist schema as simply lacking or devoid of being, truth and potential.⁶

Of course, Bustos' description should also be read alongside Guevara's writings on guerrilla warfare and the revolutionary cultivation of the "New Man." Bustos here describes a limit that cannot easily be brought within the Guevarian revolutionary fray. In *Guerrilla Warfare*, Guevara recalls the cultivation of relations with local peasantry in Cuba as a key factor in the success of anti-Batista guerrillas during the 1950s. From that experience he develops the view that in an "underdeveloped" Latin America the countryside should be considered the prime territory for revolutionary activity—but only to the extent that the guerrilla, acting as a revolutionary vanguard, can secure the material and moral support of the peasantry. It is the willingness of local populations to provide aid and comfort for the guerrillas that confirms that the military conflict is not merely a struggle for power waged between two armed factions. In the "El nuevo hombre" essay, meanwhile, Guevara assigns the revolutionary vanguard the role of awakening the "dormant mass" known as the people, instilling in this collective body a new revolutionary consciousness. The absence of such a reciprocal relation between peasantry and guerrilla is conspicuous in the situation described by Bustos. Not only is the population he portrays not yet a *people* in the sense of a constituted political subject, it is not even a potential subject waiting to achieve consciousness. In this light, Bustos views the "lost, marginalized" inhabitants of Salta as a telluric mass that is incapable of receiving any form or historical

direction whatsoever. It would seem that militant thinking, at least as it is embodied by Bustos' narrative, can only move forward and fulfill its historical role by leaving this population behind, by writing it off as irredeemably pre-political. This "lost, marginalized" mass must fall away—disappear without any remainder—if there is to be development in the Hegelian-Marxian-Guevarian sense of a self-conscious subject as the guiding telos and end of history. This "lost, marginalized" mass is thus the detritus of self-consciousness and developmental history. Its existence is both engendered by the history of capitalist development and excluded from it at the same time. It is the silent, unconscious remainder of political subjectivation vis-à-vis the modern state.

There are important connections that can be drawn between Bustos' remarks on the "lost, marginalized" population of Orán and published accounts of how this small guerrilla group put on trial and executed its own members on two separate occasions. Jouvé's account of the two incidents is consistent with the recollections offered by Bustos in his interview with Anderson. The Bustos interview, however, provides additional revealing details about how the guerrilla leadership approached what it considered to be internal threats to group unity and security. Bustos describes the two condemned members, Pupi and Nardo, as naïve young recruits from upper-middle class Jewish families who, away from home for the first time, were seemingly unaware of what they getting into. By the time anyone realized they were in over their heads it was too late to remedy the situation: sending them home, Masetti pointed out, would mean putting the group and its mission at risk. Jouvé and Bustos coincide in their descriptions of the two recruits' rapid physical and psychological decline; they also recall the adverse effects that these situations had on group morale. Masetti declared them unfit to continue and asserted, in Bustos's words, that "a measure has to be taken that sanitizes the group's psychology, that

liberates it from this thing that is corroding it” (Anderson 578). Masetti ordered “revolutionary trials” for the two, which resulted in convictions and death sentences. I cite from Bustos’ recollection of the second case:

Nardo was a new arrival...a nineteen-year-old Jewish bank clerk from Córdoba. He had almost immediately fallen apart in the harsh jungle and was exhibiting the same symptoms of distress that had finished off Pupi. [A *compañero*] had guided Nardo on his first hike up to the camp, and recalled that the young man clearly had no idea what he was getting into. Nardo asked if we gave talks, if we had meetings...as if he was coming to some kind of flower show. He was done for after two days. He had flat feet, was frightened of going down slopes, and he began animalizing. It was truly repellant, and as the days went by he began physically to look more like an animal. To go down a hill he went down on his ass, walked on all fours; a pathetic image for a guerrilla...He was dirty, unclean, and finally he was punished, given the hardest jobs, that kind of thing (588).

It bears repeating that Bustos frames this situation as an organic crisis for the EGP. The personal collapse suffered by Nardo threatens to become the undoing of the group. As with his description of the inhabitants of the region, Bustos’ account of Nardo’s situation as a regression to “animalism” is revealing of how the guerrilla envisioned its own relation to history, politics and ethics. Were it taken from a literary text and not an interview, this scene could be categorized as an allegory of militant reason and its crisis: the psychological collapse of Nardo indicates—via the trope of “animalization”—the *disgusting* (in the precise sense of what cannot be digested and elevated by Hegelian reason) possibility of a reversal of developmental history. It presents the precise inversion of developmentalist history’s teleological trajectory, for which self-consciousness is the end (*telos*) that guides history from beginning to conclusion. This deviation from the *telos* must in turn be expelled if the group is to regain the path that is proper to the militant subject.

The likening of Nardo’s subjective destitution to a regression cannot help but recall—by acting as a negative example—the way in which Hegel, in the *Introduction to the Lectures on Philosophy of History*, places the human above all other animals by equating self-consciousness

with freedom. Hegel, in his account of the role of freedom in history, draws a connection between freedom and the human that could easily serve as an epigraph for Bustos' description of degradation and subjective destitution:

Since man alone—as distinct from the animals—is a thinking being, he alone possesses freedom, and he possess it solely by virtue of his ability to think. Consciousness of freedom consists in the fact that the individual comprehends himself as a person, i.e. that he sees himself in his distinct existence as inherently universal, as capable of abstraction from and renunciation of everything particular, and therefore as inherently infinite (144).

Freedom as the capacity to think is self-consciousness as awareness of the freedom that lies within one. Freedom is thinking becoming aware of itself as a form of immanence that can be abstracted from every contingency and accident. The immanence of the thinking self, its infinite separability from the contingency of context, is precisely the fact that it thinks: immanence obtains to the precise degree that the self is no longer unconscious, to the extent that it no longer exhausts itself in “animalizing.” Freedom as self-consciousness is thus the negation of that mere—and therefore unredeemable—particularity that Bustos calls animality. It is the negation of negation. The structure of world history, for Hegel, mirrors the development of this principle of freedom as self-consciousness, from the early “imperfect and partial” manifestations of freedom (e.g., the Greek recognition of freedom for some men, while denying it to slaves and women) to its pure, universal form (post-1789 democracy, based on the principle—if not the reality—of equality and liberty for all). The personal and historical dimensions of reason and self-consciousness become linked in Hegel's argument through the socio-political example of a historical people obtaining subjectivity—that is, developing in the sense of becoming aware of itself—through the creation of a state together with the writing of its own history and laws.

I now want to deviate momentarily from the focus on the EGP in order to touch on one of this story's interesting footnotes: the infamous history linking Bustos to the death of Che

Guevara. By 1967, Guevara had left Cuba and entered Bolivia under an assumed identity, leading a guerrilla *foco* in an uprising against the Barrientos regime. Bustos and Regis Debray traveled to Bolivia to assist Guevara but were detained and questioned by the Bolivian military and CIA operatives when they tried to leave. A few weeks later the army announced that Che himself had been captured and killed. Photos were publicized documenting Guevara's capture and showing his prostrate corpse in a position that many have likened to the image of the lifeless Christ recently taken down from the cross. In the wake of Guevara's death, Bustos and Debray were tried, convicted and sentenced to 30 years in a Bolivian prison. Three years later, following considerable international pressure, the two were released and flown to Santiago, Chile, where Debray received a hero's welcome from both the international press and the Allende government while Bustos was greeted with suspicion and silence. For a long time the consensus was that Bustos, who revealed after his release that he had drawn sketches for his Bolivian captors during his interrogation (he also insisted that he invented most of the faces he drew and that he gave away no one who had not already been detained), had in fact given in under torture and revealed the secret presence of Guevara in Bolivia. More recently this version has been challenged, first by Jon Lee Anderson in his 1997 biography of Guevara and then by a 2001 documentary entitled *Sacrificio*, produced for Swedish television by Erik Gandini and Tarik Saleh. *Sacrificio* asserts that Debray's actions were in fact far from heroic and that Bustos by the same token was not a "Judas." *Sacrificio*'s ironic title announces the rewriting of a key moment in the history of the Left: the real sacrifice here was not the exemplary martyrdom of Guevara but instead the unseemly scapegoating of Bustos, a ritual in which scholars, the press, the international Left and the Cuban government have all played a part. It was the portrayal of Bustos as *quebrado* that allowed Debray to be passed off as the living exemplar or reincarnation of the revolutionary

heroism that was embodied by Guevara up to and including the moment of his death. If this is *Sacrificio*'s demystifying message, I propose that the documentary also opens the door for a critical rethinking of the sacrificial logic that has informed the Left's understanding of politics on more than one occasion.

The writing off of the inhabitants of Salta as a pre-political mass that is developmentally speaking beneath even the "*indios*"; the sacrificial execution of the "animalizing" recruit in order to expel the corrosive "thing" that is afflicting the guerrilla from within; the scapegoating of Bustos following the death of Guevara: what if these were all features and consequences of the same way of thinking, a thinking that never hesitates in conceiving of history as development and as the surpassing (or negation and elevation: *Aufhebung*) of the singular, which developmental history can only grasp as non-being, as "completely ruined," "repellant," "animalizing" or as "*quebrado*"? Here we find the other side of the view of world history as development: the attempted expulsion without trace of a singular remnant that is both of the history of development and irreducible to developmentalist logic.

Sacrifice is a key motif in Guevara's 1965 essay "El hombre nuevo," where it serves as a conduit between the revolutionary vanguard and the people on the one hand (both of whom are products of the past and of the capitalist system they seek to overthrow), and the future with its promise of communism on the other hand. Sacrifice names an expenditure whose redemption will be found in the figure of a subject-to-come. "Todos y cada uno de nosotros paga puntualmente su cuota de sacrificio, conscientes de recibir el premio en la satisfacción del deber cumplido, conscientes de avanzar con todos hacia el hombre nuevo que se vislumbra en el horizonte" ("El hombre nuevo," np). The motif of sacrifice similarly appears in Bustos' recollections of training in Cuba prior to the EGP's debut. In the Argentine group's first meeting,

Guevara warned of the perils associated with the task they were about to undertake, adding that it was doubtful that any of them would live to see it through. When Bustos and the others reaffirmed their commitment to the cause, Guevara reportedly stated: “You’ve all agreed to join, and now we must prepare things, but from this moment on, consider yourselves dead. Death is the only certainty in this; some of you may survive, but all of you should consider what remains of your lives as borrowed time” (Anderson 543). Are these words not calling for the subjectivization of sovereignty, the internalization of its logic? If militancy is essentially living on borrowed time, if the militant is already “dead”—symbolically speaking—even while still biologically alive, it is because militant reason gives itself over to the presumption of the absolute sovereignty of politics over all other spheres, while at the same time internalizing the grounding of politics in a theory of war. The ground of militant reason is thanato-politics, a politics that goes in search of death. It is the sacrificing of existence to the transhistorical telos or cause of history. Sacrifice is both something subjects do (one cannot be a militant unless one is prepared to sacrifice everything for the cause) and it is a preparatory step that clears the way for that true subject whose arrival would coincide with the elimination in ourselves and in others of everything that is false or improper—greed, egoism, ignorance, false consciousness, and so on.

León Rozitchner has frequently criticized the Argentine Left for losing sight of those in whose name it claims to act: labor, peasants, urban poor, and so on. Although Rozitchner coined the phrase “a Left without a subject” to describe this tendency in a 1966 essay, it seems to me that his criticism targets precisely the forms of thinking and acting that obtain when the political is reduced to *a theory of the subject* as the true source of everything that is worth living—and dying—for. This reduction is first announced by Nietzsche with his definition of the modern subject as will to power. In the time of nihilism, when the old arbiters of value—God, the

monarch, etc.—have either fled or died, the modern subject comes to understand itself and its will as the true source of all sense and value in the world. The essence of nihilism is not only the decline of the highest values but the positing of the subject as the true source of the absolute. Since the essence of the will to power is ceaseless expansion and accumulation—if power is not expanding it is already in decline—the subject, understood as will to power, would prefer to will nothing (including its own destruction) rather than not will at all.

The incidents recounted by Jouvé and Bustos reflect a situation in which the political has become synonymous with the will to power. In a response to del Barco published in *El ojo mocho*, Rozitchner suggests that the killings of Pupi and Nardo are symptomatic of a fatal (mis)calculation that would culminate in the Left's spectacular self-destruction a decade later. The EGP purges illustrate how the Argentine Left, in the aftermath of the 1955 military coup and the subsequent prohibition of the Peronist party, nonetheless tended to assimilate a Peronist political logic that had been grounded from the very outset in a theory of war. The Argentine Left thereby abandoned the notion of “counter-violence”—or violence as a defensive strategy of last resort—in favor of the instrumental use of violence for domination of the enemy and conquest of territory or state. In Rozitchner's view, the killings of Pupi and Nardo reveal how the appropriation of a theory of war as a political means ends in the complete subsumption of the political by the logic of war. What is first taken up as a tactic becomes an end in itself, and finally—as exemplified by the figures of Pupi and Nardo—effaces the fundamental political distinction between friend and enemy. Within this zone of indistinction, one is liable to find enemies anywhere—including and especially among “us.”

What I am calling the sacrificial understanding of politics and history is of course by no means unique to the Latin American Left of the 1960s and 70s. The logic of sacrifice informs the

philosophical grounding of the modern state for Hegel, who in the *Encyclopedia* defines the state as a power that obliges individuals to acknowledge the nothingness of their private worlds and particular concerns: “the substance of the State [is] the power by which the particular independence of individuals and their absorption in the external existence of possession and in natural life is convicted of its own nothingness, and the power which mediates the conservation of the universal substance through the sacrifice—operating through the internal disposition it implies—of this natural and particular being” (*Encyclopedia*, Part III, Section 2, §546). The designation of the particular as such as *essentially nothing* prepares it for sacrifice in the inauguration of the universal ethical sphere that Hegel calls *Sittlichkeit*. Sacrifice is thus, like development, one of the names for the dialectic itself: it performs—ostensibly without remainder—the purification of the negative by the negative and the elevation of the merely particular to the power of the universal.

I now turn to del Barco’s letter. In so doing, I hope to establish that the foundational role played by ethics in del Barco’s critique of political violence turns out to mirror—rather than simply opposing—the sovereign status of the political in militant reason. While the debate between del Barco and his opponents has been characterized as a polemic between mutually exclusive points of view, I propose that militant reason and its critique in fact resemble one another in a way that neither position is prepared to acknowledge. Del Barco’s critique of militancy is based on the premise that only ethics can provide the foundation for a just community, whereas politics—no matter how much it speaks of social justice—is constitutively unable to attune its ears to the voice of alterity. To militant reason, the call and visage of the other is indistinguishable from the gaze of the enemy—who, as Schmitt reminds us, *also* necessarily appears to us as a stranger and an alien. Only the a priori adoption of the ethical

principles of non-violence and respect for the other in his or her alterity (that is, the other as other and not as a reflection of me) can guard against the proliferation of human constructs of domination. Del Barco directs his remarks not only to those who, like Jouvé, participated in the armed struggle but also to those on the Left who lent moral support to the armed struggle. His critique of militant reason presupposes that the Left as a whole bears responsibility for the crimes committed by the guerrillas. It is this universalization of responsibility, together with the perception that del Barco is engaging in an abstraction that refuses to admit any distinction between violence and counter-violence, that earns him the intellectual enmity of so many among the Argentine Left.

No attempt at justification will make us innocent again. There are no “causes” or “ideals” that will let us off the hook. We have to take on that essentially irredeemable act, the unprecedented responsibility of having intentionally caused the death of a human being. It is responsibility before our loved ones, responsibility before other human beings, responsibility without meaning or concept before what we could hesitatingly call “the absolutely other.” But beyond everything and everybody, including whatever god there might be, there is the *Thou shalt not kill*. Faced with a society that kills millions of human beings in wars, genocides, famines, illness and every kind of torment, at the base of each of us can be heard, weakly or imperiously, the *Thou shalt not kill*. It is a commandment that cannot be founded or explained but that nevertheless is there, in me and in everyone, as a presence without presence, as a force without force, as being without being. It is not a commandment that comes from outside, from some other place, but a commandment that constitutes our inconceivable and unprecedented immanence. This recognition leads me to suggest other consequences that are no less grave: to acknowledge that all of us who sympathized with or participated in some way in the Montoneros movement, in the ERP, in the FAR, or in any other armed group are responsible for their actions. I repeat: there is no “ideal” that could justify the killing of a human being, be it General Aramburu, or a militant or a police officer. *Thou shalt not kill* is the principle that is the foundation of every community. Thou shalt not kill a human being because each human being is every human being. Evil, as Levinas says, consists of exempting oneself from the consequences of one’s reasoning, saying one thing and doing another, supporting the killing of other people’s children and invoking the commandment when it comes to the killing of our own (115).

Del Barco deploys the Levinasian notion of the face to face, which describes an encounter with alterity that cannot be subsumed without violence within the totality of any

system of knowledge, in order to establish a thought of responsibility as the ethical first principle of community. Del Barco's insistence on "responsibility" both initiates his reckoning with his own past—accepting responsibility for the intellectual and moral support he gave to the *lucha armada* in the 1960s and 70s—while also suggesting that other intellectuals of his generation ought to do the same with their own histories. In another section of his letter he specifically names the renowned poet and former *Montonero* supporter Juan Gelman, whose son and daughter were among the disappeared, as embodying the tragic conjunction of being both a partisan and a victim of political violence.

This call to "confess" is interpreted by many as transgressing a long-standing unspoken agreement among the Argentine Left not to speak critically of those who were disappeared as a result of their political affiliations. To many ears, del Barco's call for "responsibility" comes uncomfortably close to the ideological narrative known as the *teoría de los dos demonios*, which held sway in official circles as well as popular perception during the immediate post-dictatorship period. The "theory of the two demons," which informed the thinking of the Alfonsín and Menem administrations as well as much of human rights discourse (as exemplified 1984 CONADEP report), sought to simplify the extraordinary complexity of Argentine politics during the 1955-76 period by portraying conflicts of the recent past in stark terms that pit the moral equivalence of political antagonists against the "innocence" of those who are said to have remained outside the political fray. On one hand, according to this narrative, there were the twin evils, the terrorisms of the Left and Right (the latter of which eventually merged with State terror under the military junta), while on the other hand there was the decent, non-violent majority who watched and suffered—and sometimes perished—while the two evils did battle. For many of his respondents, del Barco's appeal to a Levinasian thought of responsibility without limit blends a

little too easily with this moralistic logic of equivalence that would erase any distinction between dissident violence or “counter-violence” and the illegal terrorist strategies employed by the Right and later adopted by the military state, while ignoring both the well-documented and vast disparities between Leftist violence and the military response as well as the complicity of “ordinary Argentines” in the creation of a terrorist state.⁷

In my view, the association of del Barco’s call for responsibility with *la teoría de los dos demonios*, while understandable, represents a misreading of his text. Del Barco is not interested in comparison nor does he propose any sort of moral equivalence between militants and the state (although it could well be that he is proposing a *logical* equivalence between the forms of thinking that shapes Left and the Right in post-1955 Argentina). Putting that criticism of del Barco’s letter aside, it seems to me that the term “responsibility” bears more than one meaning in his letter. On one hand, it is responsibility to the other prior to—or in the absence of—the other giving any recognizable sign of belonging to the community, of being one of us. It is responsibility to radical alterity rather than to identity or sameness as determined by nationality or any other form of politics. This thought of responsibility points beyond—irreconcilably beyond—the partisan nature of politics as understood by Schmitt and much of the Latin American Left in the 1960s and 70s: that is, beyond a politics defined essentially by the friend/enemy distinction. Indeed, del Barco is precisely pitting ethics against politics by substituting the figure of the enemy—in this case, an internal enemy that is embodied by Pupi and Nardo—with the figure of the absolutely other. Ethics would thus provide a bulwark against the unavoidable possibility of mortal violence that grounds the political in Schmitt. The political calculus of friendship and enmity, as del Barco thinks it, cannot free itself from the possibility of

doing violence to alterity by misrecognizing as enmity a difference that defies and ruins the specular operation of recognition.

On the other hand, as Diego Tatián has suggested in a response entitled “Más allá de la guerra,” del Barco’s call for responsibility need not be interpreted exclusively or even primarily as a criticism leveled retrospectively against those who opted for revolutionary militancy three decades ago. The temporality proper to this thought of responsibility, for Tatián, is the historical present insofar as its subject—the contemporary Left—has yet to engage in a substantive debate concerning its own role in what transpired in Argentina during the 1970s, as well as regarding the part the Left has played in shaping the historical—or post-historical—present. Despite the claim to universality that underlies the rejection of violence, nowhere does del Barco presume to occupy a privileged perspective that would authorize him to pass judgment on decisions made at another time and in a different historical juncture. Responsibility, in Tatián’s reading, is not a transhistorical indictment of actors or decisions taken in the past, but rather a call intended to resonate in and for the present. If the Left is to reconstitute itself as a viable social force in a contemporary setting—in which ideological conflict has been thoroughly stigmatized and the reigning assumption for some time has been that the end of history as progression and development is now in sight—this Left must first learn to reckon with its own past, not by judging the past as past but rather by interrogating the ways in which the past appears in the present, or how the historical present has been shaped by the past and its decisions. To assume responsibility is not to pass judgment on others (even the others among “us”) but rather to reject one possible way of being in the present: it is to refuse to concede to any view of the present that is shaped by “lies, dishonesty, complacency, (self) deception or simple ingenuousness” (“Letter from Diego Tatián,” 141). Tatián suggests that responsibility is another name for the

transmission of memory and experience from one generation and one historical moment to another. It thus names what *could be* an inheritance (*legado*), albeit one that still remains to be taken up by the Left today—assuming, that is, that it is possible to transmit knowledge and experience in the first place.

Is it possible to withdraw from the war of interpretations, which is potentially infinite, even though as in any war there are victors and vanquished? Is there a way out of war? On the answer to this question—which is not an epistemological one, or even a solely theoretical one—hangs the possibility of an understanding, both more extensive and more intensive, of the ways in which we act with and against others—of what we call politics. Perhaps this transition has already begun to take place, if only very slowly. If I am not mistaken, Oscar del Barco's letter, whether or not we agree with it, points in this direction. Other questions, perhaps undecidable in their deepest aspects, are brought together here. Is the transmission of experience possible in politics? Are experience and the accumulation of experience possible? Is the will of those who once again want to change the world affected by the disenchanted testimony of those who failed to do so—or who were let down by history—and who have only their lucidity left? (142).

Responsibility is not a synonym for the theory of the two demons but rather an alternative to it, a rejection of what Tatián describes as the endless war of competing interpretations, each of which is calculated to negate the other. It would thus also provide a counter-measure to what León Rozitchner has described as—beginning with Perón—the internalization of a theory of war as the ground for politics on the part of the Argentine Left. Tatián here suggests a link or bridge between politics and memory, one that is concerned not with truth and justice but with questions of transmission, experience and knowledge. The question *Is the transmission of experience possible?* frames memory as an inheritance—it asks, Is it possible for one generation to learn from the errors and triumphs of prior generations, or is every generation destined to grapple with its questions as if for the first time?—but it also touches on the relation between knowledge and politics: What is the relation between thinking and action, theory and practice? If we accept the Derridean principle that no amount of knowledge and no degree of deliberation can prepare us to act, in the sense that knowledge can never guarantee that the decision we undertake will be the

right one, then is it still possible to speak meaningfully of a “politics of memory”? If theory cannot provide the ground for politics, neither can memory. Nor should it be asked to. To do so would be to forget the *aporia* that both separates reflection and acting while also binding them together.

By way of conclusion, I want to indicate where I find some unacknowledged points in common between del Barco’s critique and its object, which I have been calling militant reason. In his recourse to Levinas, whose thinking he sees as providing an alternative—more just and durable—ground for the social, del Barco runs the risk of transforming the singular limit that is indicated by the face (which is ultimately not only the alterity of the other but also the alterity within each of us) into a norm or first principle that can be known and repeated by everyone. Indeed, as del Barco’s conclusions make clear, alterity as first principle of the social *must* be knowable, repeatable and internalizable if it is to serve as the lawful and respected ground for a space that is truly common and for all. Del Barco concedes, of course, that practically speaking the “*No matarás*” is impossible to implement. There will always be murder, perhaps, but this reality does not cancel the nature of the ethical imperative. The function of the command *No matarás* would thus be analogous to a Kantian regulative idea: it is something we aim at while knowing full well that we must fall short of it. The injunction plays the role of an ethical fiction in del Barco’s letter. While the philosopher knows that its realization is to be deferred indefinitely, our collective decision to believe in the fiction—or to act as its injunction if were in effect, as if there were already a society in which killing the other were never a consideration—is what makes community of any kind possible in the first place. But where, we might ask, could such a collective decision (let us act *as if*...) come from?

It seems to me that del Barco's treatment of the command *No matarás* as the necessary and only possible foundation for a just community renders itself unstable on two different points. For one, as a speech act it has the ironic effect of reintroducing the very specter it tries to ward off, since the need to proscribe murder cannot help but recall the possibility of murder. To put this in slightly different and more Levinasian terms, the injunction necessarily misses the thing it aims at, which del Barco names "the absolutely other"—an alterity that we first encounter in the face of the other, but which will also turn out to have been there within us all along. In appealing to this thought of an infinite alterity that eludes our powers of cognition and totalization, del Barco seeks to establish the sacred value of an *alter* that is both singular ("all men are sacred") and universal (the Borgesian phrase "every man is all men"). In appealing to the Levinasian *autrui*, a relation of non-relation that exceeds all economies of knowledge and power, del Barco cannot avoid committing a kind of violence against his presumptive referent: the establishment of the *No matarás* as first principle of community would mean the forcible repatriation of *autrui* within a new totality, together with the forgetting of what is unprecedented and incalculable in every encounter. The institutionalization of the encounter with alterity as a norm that can be read and committed to memory by all would mean that the encounter can only take place with what is already legible and thus recognizable, under terms that are familiar and repeatable by all. Although ethical thinking in del Barco commits itself to grasping and preserving the other in its singular dignity and strangeness, everything it touches in this saving endeavor turns out to be of *the same*. As first principle, *No matarás* can only secure universality at the expense of singularity. In this sense, it is not unlike militant reason.

Militant reason and del Barco's critique of militancy mirror one another to the extent that each envisions a totality that would emerge through the positing of a sovereign, proper ground

that is free from contamination by what it is not. Militancy presupposes the sovereignty of the political over all other spheres, because the political decision (friend or enemy?) comes prior to ethics (aiding the *campesinos*) and determines it. By the same token, del Barco's critique of militant reason posits ethics as the sovereign ground of community. Ethics for del Barco precedes any consideration of the other's politics, of history and so on. Both positions, in my view, are calculated to avoid the possibility that *neither* the ethical *nor* the political is able to constitute a proper (self-contained and self-sufficient) totality of its own, and that both ethics and politics are in fact informed by contact with an indeterminate outside. The ethical, to take just one side of this equation, is unable to constitute itself reflexively as a field; instead, it emerges and is shaped, as I will now suggest, by interruption—for instance, by the unexpected presence of the political in the form of the Levinasian “third.” This thought of the mutual implication and interruption of the ethical and the political would cause the very idea of the proper to unravel.

As Levinas describes it, the ethical begins with our experience of the face as a *phenomenal materiality* that is irreducibility to ideality. The face presents what *Totality and Infinity* calls an “*ideatum* that surpasses its idea” (49). In Levinas' thinking, the face to face encounter also presupposes, as a kind of co-originary moment, the interruption of this scene of intimate communion by the presence of a third party who, in Levinas's words, “does not wait” (“Substitution,” 89). Taken together, these two thoughts—the encounter with phenomenality that presents us with an experience of alterity; the interruption of communion by the presence of a third, or what Jacques Derrida in *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas* terms “other others”—place a demand on thinking that cannot be resolved or explained through recourse to an ideal (spirit, self-consciousness, etc.). By the same token, both the “face to face” and “the third” name occurrences that exceed our expectations and which cannot therefore be calculated or legislated

in advance. The phenomenal immediacy of the face-to-face underscores how the ethical relation ruins the identity of the self-conscious subject. At the same time, the unexpected “interruption” of immediacy by a figure that is not (yet) of mediation, but which undoubtedly attests to the necessity of mediation and therefore of politics, exposes the ethical realm to what is beyond ethics. In fact, the trope of “interruption” can only misname something that in fact destabilizes the ethical totality from within ethics itself, since for Levinas the “face-to-face” is always already haunted by a thought of the third who “does not wait.”

It is thus precisely the excess in any encounter—a phenomenality irreducible to both the reflective power of consciousness and the explanatory power of knowledge systems, or the silent presence of others of whom I am not yet aware—that both establishes the urgency of the ethical *and* ruins ethics at the same time, preventing it from establishing itself as ontology or self-enclosed totality. Without a thought of the third or other others—both of which name the beginning of the political and its calculations—the ethical would lose its exigency. And yet the unexpected appearance of the third interrupts or disrupts the communing of the ethical with itself. The political is thus both the condition of possibility *and* the condition of impossibility of the ethical. Ethics as relation to alterity is rendered unstable from the very beginning by the comparisons, negotiations and calculations that are set in motion as soon as we have to do with *more than two*. It seems to me that the recollections of experiences of militancy offered by Jouvé, Bustos and del Barco are troubled by similar recollections of mutual implication and reciprocal destabilization between the ethical and the political. The “ruined” inhabitants of Orán, the degraded, “animalizing” recruits, the “sacrificing” of Bustos in order to resurrect the exemplary subject of militancy: each remembered scenario attests in its own way to the interruption of the political by the ethical and the interruption of the ethical by the political. It

may be that this encounter, this reciprocal touching, informing and destabilization, is not an accident that could be fully accounted for and thereby surpassed but that it is what urgently needs to be thought today.

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² See Alberto Moreiras, “Ethics and Politics in Héctor Aguilar Camín’s *Morir en el Golfo* and *La guerra de Galio*.”

³ The Bayer-Giardinelli debate has recently been published as part of a critical collection of Bayer’s work entitled *Entredichos: Osvaldo Bayer, 30 años de polémicas*.

⁴ In referring to John of Salisbury, Bayer has recourse to an old association between justice and the restoration of equilibrium: “El que tiene poder sólo debe ser un servidor del bienestar público y esclavo de la equidad. Cada uno puede ser un tirano en su misión, que destruya o interprete las leyes a su manera. Por eso—sostenía el filósofo—es equitativo y justo (*“aequum et iustum”*) recomponer el equilibrio perdido. ‘Matar al tirano—agregaba—no sólo está permitido sino que además es equitativo y justo’” (“Matar al tirano,” *Página 12*, 23 enero 1993). However, Bayer’s conception of justice as *adequation to the way things are* would be seem to be in conflict with Wilckens’ appeal to a tomorrow that is radically unlike the present. It is in this respect that the recourse to a thought of justice proves unable to sustain a connection between the political sanctioning of violence and a radical critique of the present.

⁵ From published reports it would seem clear that the killing of Varela was indeed premeditated. The *New York Times* of January 25, 1923, paraphrasing Argentine police, reports that Wilckens confessed to the killing while stating that he “had long awaited the opportunity to slay the officer without killing members of Varela’s family or other innocent persons.” Wilckens also insisted that, had he not killed Varela, the Lieutenant Colonel would undoubtedly have repeated his crimes at some point in the future. A potential discrepancy emerges, then, between two points of emphasis: Varela as posing a material threat to the community and Varela as an icon of systemic criminality. These two ideas are certainly not mutually exclusive—he could well be both—but the ambiguity arises, in my view, because *both* are invoked by Wilckens and Bayer to justify the killing as beyond vengeance and murder. It seems that Wilckens (and Bayer) must demonstrate both that Varela posed a continued threat and that his elimination would not merely result in someone else like Varela taking his place. Varela must be seen as *both* singular *and* exemplary in order for his killing to be justified.

⁶ For an illuminating overview of developmentalist thinking in the philosophy of history, see John Kraniauskas, “Difference Against Development: Spiritual Accumulation and the Politics of Freedom,” *boundary 2* 32:2 (2005): 53-80.

⁷ As Martin Edwin Anderson has shown in *Dossier Secreto*, the “just war” narrative, which was employed by the military to legitimate a repression whose ferocity and illegality was perhaps unprecedented in Argentine history, was in truth nothing more than a self-serving fiction. Any real threat posed by Leftist guerrilla groups had been liquidated well before the March 1976 *golpe de estado*.